

# Introduction

Sidewalks and trails serve as critical links in the transportation network by providing pedestrian access to commercial districts, schools, businesses, government offices, and recreation areas. Because sidewalks and trails provide such fundamental services to the public, they should be designed to meet the needs of the widest possible range of users.

Accessible sidewalks and trails enrich a community's quality of life on many levels. People with disabilities are better able to participate in the community if accessible facilities are available because it is easier for them to reach their desired destinations. Accessible sidewalk and trail networks are cost-effective because they promote independence for people with disabilities and reduce the need for social services in many cases. Commercial districts with accessible facilities have a customer base that includes people with disabilities. People with temporary disabilities such as broken legs also will be able to continue their daily functions with less inconvenience.

More accessible sidewalks and trails also mean better pedestrian facilities for everyone. Sidewalks and trails with curb ramps and benches invite strolling and shopping. Neighborhoods with well-designed pedestrian facilities are generally safer because more people are out walking in the community. In addition, a broader range of consumer, social, and recreational opportunities is available in areas catering to pedestrians.

Unfortunately, many sidewalks and trails do not adequately meet the needs of people with disabilities, who make up nearly one-fifth of the American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1994). People with disabilities who live in areas without accessible facilities and do not have access to automobiles face a greater

risk of becoming isolated from the community and unnecessarily dependent upon others to perform errands such as grocery shopping.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is a civil rights law that identifies and prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. The ADA prohibits public entities from designing new facilities or altering existing facilities, including sidewalks and trails, that are not accessible to people with disabilities. Although the current ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) do not specifically address sidewalk and trail design, the guidelines do contain provisions that are applicable to sidewalks and trails. To best serve people with disabilities and meet the legal obligations of the ADA, designers should follow the applicable guidelines in ADAAG whenever possible.

In an effort to determine when ADAAG provisions apply to sidewalks and trails, and to bridge the remaining gaps, the Federal Highway Administration sponsored a project to research existing conditions on sidewalks and trails for people with disabilities. As part of Phase I of this project, an extensive literature review was conducted, and existing guidelines and recommendations for developing sidewalks and trails were compiled and analyzed. In addition, site visits were made to many towns and cities across the United States. The locations included areas known for providing excellent accommodations for people with disabilities, as well as locations with less accessible facilities. Quantitative measurements of sidewalk and trail characteristics that affect accessibility were taken at the sites. Experts also were interviewed to obtain the most current information on sidewalk and trail access as it relates to people with disabilities.

This report presents the findings of the Phase I study. A number of factors that affect the accessibility of sidewalks and trails in the United States are presented. The history of accessibility legislation and an overview of current accessibility laws are provided as a social backdrop to the study. The travel characteristics of people with disabilities, children, and older adults are analyzed in relation to their use of sidewalks and trails. The effects of current legislation pertaining to sidewalk and trail project planning and funding are reviewed. Current design practices used in the design of sidewalks and trails are described and analyzed in terms of accessibility, engineering, and construction.

Definitions for most of the terms in this report can be found in Appendix B. For the purposes of this report, *path or pathway* may refer to either a sidewalk or a trail. A *sidewalk* is defined in this report as the portion of a highway, road, or street intended for pedestrians. A *trail* is defined

as a path of travel for recreation and/or transportation within a park, natural environment, or designated corridor that is not classified as a highway, road, or street. A *shared-use path* is defined as a trail permitting more than one type of user, such as a trail specifying both pedestrians and bicyclists as designated users. An equestrian-only trail would not be considered a shared-use path.

Part II of this project, a guidebook, will produce a manual recommending accessible designs for sidewalk and trail facilities. Guidebook recommendations will draw upon information gathered for this report and will provide specific practices that can improve the accessibility of outdoor pathways. General principles of accessible design, accessibility requirements, facility design suggestions, and other considerations will be discussed. Sufficient detail will be included to allow planners and designers to improve the accessibility of sidewalks and trails in their communities.